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ABSTRACT

The academic exit interview provides faculty members with an opportunity to express their reasons for leaving the university. The study was designed to discover if there were significant differences between academic gender groups, between rank groups, and among years of experience groups in rating exit interviewing variables: conduct exit interviews, formal training in conducting exit interviews, special list of questions, involuntarily leave department, level of satisfaction, and reliability and validity of the interview. Completed survey instruments were received from 76 department heads/chairs at a large Midwestern university. The results indicated: (1) only 14% of heads/chairs have conducted exit interviews; (2) 27% believe the exit interview is reliable; (3) 7% believe exit interviews are valid in discovering the real reason why faculty members are leaving; (4) no significant differences existed between gender groups, rank groups, and years of experience groups; but (5) all respondents believe exit interviews can provide valuable information to the departments and the university. Based on the findings, two communication faculty at the university are developing a workshop to teach administrators interviewing skills to conduct exit interviews. (Contains 9 references and 4 tables of data.) (RS)

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An Investigation of the Academic Exit Interview

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ABSTRACT

The academic exit interview provides faculty members with an opportunity to express their reasons for leaving the university. The study was designed to discover if there were significant differences between academic gender groups, between rank groups, and among years of experience groups in rating exit interviewing variables: conduct exit interviews, formal training in conducting exit interviews, special list of questions, involuntarily leave department, level of satisfaction, and reliability and validity of the interview. The results indicate that only 14 percent of heads/chairs have conducted exit interviews and only 27 percent believe the exit interview is reliable. Chi Square analyses were completed on each item. Other results are discuss in the paper.

The exit interview provides employees with an opportunity to express their reasons for leaving an organization. Sherwood (1980) indicated that the formal exit interview is one of the best ways to find out where personal operating and employee relation problems exist, as well as what attitudes employees hold about their jobs and management itself. Zima (1985) concluded that supervisors can identify the causes of employee attrition. Anderson and Killingberg (1999) asserted the goal of the exit interview is to create a sense of closure for the interviewee , to request and obtain valid feedback about the organization , and to facilitate the transition for both worker and organization

Limited research has been conducted on the exit interview, and the investigator was unable to uncover any studies that focused on the academic exit interview. Research by Dorst, Obrien, and Marsh (1987) pointed out seven steps to better exit interviews:

1. Start with the assumption that open and honest responses will not be easily obtained.

2. Conduct the interview a day or two before the interviewee leaves.

3. Use skilled interviewers, preferably from the personnel department.

4. Conduct the interview at the worksite in a comfortable environment free of interruptions.

5. Assure the employee that the individual names will not be associated with information shared during the interview.

6. Use a structured interview format.

7. Use questions on the interview questionnaire that are open-ended and allow for deeper probing.

Although the review of literature did not uncover any academic exit interview studies, Michal-Johnson stressed the following in his book, Saying Good-Bye: A Manager's Guide to Employment Dismissal. (1985):

1. Termination interviews must be conducted in private setting.
2. Plan the interview, including the opening, the middle and the closing.
3. Treat the interviewee with dignity, even though the interviewee might not be willing to reciprocate.
4. Do not offer the interviewee advice on how to handle the firing.
5. Keep the interview short. Long drawn-out termination interviews prolong the agony and pain for both parties involved.
6. Carefully evaluate the advisability of terminating.

PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

The purposes of this study are to (1) discover if the department heads/chairs conduct exit interviews with faculty members who voluntary or involuntary leave the department, 2) determine if department heads/chairs have formal training in conducting exit interviews, 3) assess whether the exit interviews are reliable and valid, and 4) assess the approach used in conducting exit interviews. Specifically, three exit interviewing methods were assessed:
Tell and Sell: The Tell and Sell method is characterized by preparing an assessment and presenting it to the subordinate (Maier, 1986). This is downward communication and would be used primarily when a subordinate was fired.
Tell and Listen: The Tell and Listen method is similar to the Tell and Sell method as the interviewer still plays the role of judge, but the supervisor

encourages disagreement to discover the true feeling of the employee. The interviewee has an opportunity to release defensive feelings, and thus some upward communication does occur. The Tell and Listen method can be used in both voluntary and involuntary exit interviews.

Problem Solving: The Problem Solving Method takes the interviewer out of the role of judge to that of a helper and places emphasis on interviewee development. This method would be used with interviewees who voluntarily leave the department. McDowell (l991) suggested the following questions:

1. What were your first impressions of the university?
2. What was your favorite aspect of the position?
3. What else did you like about the position?
4. What did you like least about the position?
5. Did you like the students?
6. Did you like what you taught?
7. Were your responsibilities clearly communicated?
8. Did you feel the University was interested in you?

In addition, the Head/Chair would attempt to discover the reasons why the faculty members is leaving by asking, "Why have you decided to leave the University?" "What do you consider the advantages of the new position over the position in our department?" "Do you consider the new faculty position a promotion?"

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Are there significant differences between academic gender groups, between rank groups, and among years of experience groups in rating exiting interviewing variables: conduct exit interviews, formal training in conducting

exit interviews, special list of questions, voluntarily leave department, involuntarily leave department, level of satisfaction, reliable and valid?
2. Are there significant differences between academic gender groups, between rank groups, and among years of experience groups in rating the following: types of exit interviews, dimensions of exit interviews, types of questions used during the exit interview?

PROCEDURES

A sample of 100 department heads/chairs were randomly selected by Central Mailing at a large midwestern university. During the third week of the fall quarter, 1998, questionnaires were packaged and sent through Central Mailing to the randomly selected members of the population.

INSTRUMENT

The Exit Interview Questionnaire , consisting of three parts, was developed by adapting appraisal interviewing items and developing items based on a review of exit interview materials, (McDowell, 1991).

Evaluation Areas: Part 1 focused on heads/chairs formal training in exit interviewing, conduct exit interviews, specific list of questions, voluntarily leave department, involuntarily leave department, level of satisfaction and reliability and validity of their assessment of faculty members.

Exit Methods: Part 2 was based on a series of conclusions reported by several textbooks and articles (Stano, 1983; Stewart and Cash, 1996). Specifically the researcher asked respondents to read three descriptions of methods to use when conducting an exit interview and rank order them based on how they conduct exit interviews. If respondents have not conducted exit interviews they were

to rank order them on how they think they would conduct exit interviews.

STATISTICAL METHODS

Means, percentages, chi square analysis, factor analysis and analysis of variance were completed on the data.

RESULTS

The results indicate that 76 percent (64 males and 14 females) responded to the survey. Sixty-five percent of the respondents were full professors. Other results, reported in Table 1, reveal that 53 percent have had 5-years or less as heads/chairs. Table 2 reports the heads/chairs experiences and perceptions of the academic exit interview. The results show that only 14 (18%) of heads/chairs have conducted exit interviews. None of the heads/chairs have had formal training in conducting exit interviews, use a specific list of questions, and conduct exit interviews with faculty members who involuntarily leave the department. Although 7 of the 14 (50%) of heads/chairs are satisfied with how they conduct exit interviews, only 27% of the respondents believe the exit interview is reliable and only 7% believe it is valid. The item by item Chi Square analyses between the independent and dependent variables produced no significant results. The preferred exit interview method results, reported in Table 3, show that the Problem Solving method was used by all 14 department heads/chairs who have conducted exit interviews. In addition, all other heads/chairs indicate that this would be their preferred method.

No significant differences occurred between groups in rating the heads/chairs' perceptions and behaviors during the exit interview. Over 75 percent of heads/chairs discuss the work environment, encourage upward communication, and discuss current research the faculty member completed as a member of the department.

The factor analysis produced two factors which accounted for 60 percent of the variance (see Table 4). The factors are labeled: "Direction in Communication" and "Positive Communication." No significant differences occurred between gender groups, rank groups, and years of experience groups.

DISCUSSION

An interpretation of the results of the study indicates that 76 percent of heads/chairs responded to the questionnaire, but only 18 percent of the respondents have conducted exit interviews and none have had any training in preparing to conduct the interviews. In addition, none of the heads/chairs who conduct interviews use a specific list of questions and only 27 percent believe the interviews are reliable and only 7 percent believe interviewers are valid to discover the real reason why faculty members are voluntarily leaving the department.

The final question on the survey asked for the following information:

> How do you feel about conducting exit interviews with faculty members who voluntarily or involuntarily leave your department?

The department heads/chairs who did not conduct exit interviews also were to answer this question. Here are some of the responses:

The exit interview is a rich source of data and ideas. While formal training may not be necessary, the sharing of ideas could be of value to me.

No experience with involuntary. I feel comfortable in all exit interviews, including staff and graduate students.

If one stays in contact with department faculty and on an open level of communication the utility of the exit interview may be low.

Very important information to be used in future planning.

Difficult but valuable.

I think it is a good idea though one we've not pursued.

It is important. Far, far more important is having regular communication with the exit interview being only a small component.

I have not had an opportunity to conduct a formal exit interview, although I am comfortable with the process.

I never sat a person down and said, now, after all our negotiations, lets do an exit interview.

The results seem to indicate that most department heads/chairs think that they should conduct exit interviews, but they have had no formal training. Moreover, most believe that exit interviews would be a conversation. McDowell (1991) concluded that the exit interview is an information gathering interview where the interviewer has developed a list of standard questions, as well as specific questions concerning the individual . It is also important to conduct the exit interview with faculty members who have been terminated. At present there is no mandatory retirement age, so faculty members who decide to retire should be asked to participate in an exit interview.

Overall, none of the 76 respondents to the questionnaire had training in conducting exit interviews and 82 percent have not conducted exit interview. All 76 (100%) believe that exit interviews can provide valuable information to the department and the university. The results of this study were shared with administrators at the Midwestern university where the study was done. As a result two communication professors are planning a workshop to teach administrators interviewing skills to conduct exit interviews. In addition, department heads/chairs will participate in role playing exercises. The exit interview will used to gain information concerning why faculty members have decided to leave for a position at another university or decided to retire and also gain information from faculty members who have been terminated from their positions.

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Table 1

Demographic Faculty Administrators

Gender	F	%	Rank	F	%	Years	F	%
Females	14	18	Full Ad.	51	65	0-5	41	53
Males	64	82	Associate Ad.	27	35	6-10	20	26
						11+	17	21

Table 2
Administrators ' Experiences and Perceptions
Of the Academic Exit Interview

Items	%
Conduct exit interviews	18
Formal training in exit interviews	0
Specific list of questions	0
Voluntarily leave department	65
Involuntarily leave department	0
Level of satisfaction	50
Reliable	27
Valid	7

Table 3
Preferred Interview Method

Items	%
I communicate evaluation.	69
I try to persuade faculty members to stay	43
I encourage upward communication	81
I discuss human relations factors.	67
I discuss the work environment.	95
I discuss the faculty members attitudes toward co-workers.	52
I discuss current research the faculty member completed during his/her employment in the department.	76
I discuss major accomplishments the faculty member has made to the department.	69

Table 4
Dimensions of Exit Interviewing Procedures

Items	Loadings
Factor 1: Direction of Communication	
I communicate evaluation	.85
I encourage upward communication	.63
I discuss the faculty member's attitudes toward co-workers	.75
I discuss current research the faculty member completed during his/her employment in the department.	.68
Factor 2: Positive Communication	
I discuss the work environment.	.81
I discuss major accomplishments the faculty member has made to the department.	.86

Factor l controls for 37 percent of the variance
Factor 2 controls for 23 percent of the variance